

Friday, April 27, 2001

Mr. Frank R. Finch, Executive Director  
South Florida Water Management District  
3301 Gun Club Road  
West Palm Beach, FL 33406

Subject: Lake Okeechobee, Permit #50-0679349  
Suspension of the Interim Action Plan

Dear Mr. Finch:

I am writing to convey the Department's interest and support in the South Florida Water Management District's actions in response to the extreme drought conditions we are facing in South Florida. This situation only further accentuates the complexities of managing this resource for its competing interests.

We recognize that the Lake is already at its lowest stage on record, and that the long-range forecast predicts that we will experience more extreme water shortage conditions through 2002. The Lake Okeechobee Service Area, which includes the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Rivers, five municipal drinking water facilities, and the highest concentration of agriculture in the state, has been on Phase III water restrictions since November of last year. The Lower East Coast will soon face the same fate as the Water Conservation Areas continue to fall. Also of concern is the fact that the Lake levels have dropped below the proposed Minimum Flow and Level, established for the protection of the biology of the Lake.

This drought is indeed worse than any drought we have faced since the development and implementation of the Lake Okeechobee permit in 1983. As you are aware, this permit included in it target loadings for certain structures around the Lake. Of major concern is that backpumping which has already occurred, over the last year, has resulted in an exceedance of at least one of these limits. Although this does raise certain serious questions that we need to discuss, the Department understands the extenuating circumstances that has caused this and supports the District's actions. Clearly, backpumping is one of many tools that must be utilized to meet the water supply demands of all the user groups.

We recognize that backpumping is a viable option for increasing the amount of water in the Lake. In fact, given the low water levels in the surroundings areas to the north, east, and west, it maybe the only substantial amount of inflow to the Lake throughout the drought. We would like to work with the District, however, to develop a standard operating procedure that would be used as a reference to minimize potential impacts and define the exit strategy for this action. Please contact Melissa Meeker, our Southeast District Director or me to further discuss this request. We appreciate your willingness to work with us.

Sincerely,

Kirby B. Green, III  
Deputy Secretary

Cc: Secretary Struhs  
Melissa Meeker  
Jerry Brooks  
Jennifer Fitzwater  
Ernie Barnett